Interview with Stuart P. Lillico , Fall 1988

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STUART P. LILLICO

Interviewed by: John Hogan

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Q: Stuart P. Lillico is our subject today. He was born April 5, 1909 in Seattle. His school was the University of Washington.

He joined the U.S. Information Agency in 1953, which, of course, leaves room for quite a lengthy career before he ever entered USIA.

ENTRANCE INTO USIA: 1953

Stuart, you have agreed to participate in this oral history project we are having in the U.S. Information Agency. I wonder if you could tell me what was it that led you to make a decision to join the U.S. Information Agency?

LILLICO: It is rather simple. The agency asked me to come in. I had been in newspaper work both in the U.S. and in the Far East for about twenty years and I had a number of friends in the agency in Washington, where I was working at that time. Someone put my name in and the next thing I knew, late in 1952, I was invited to come down for an interview.

Since I was eager to go back overseas, especially in the Far East where I had a great deal of experience, I accepted without any hesitation and joined the Agency. I reported for duty the day after President Eisenhower was inaugurated. So, I came in with Eisenhower.

Q: Well, that is quite a distinction. You came into the agency in 1953, then. You must have been sent to a post right away.

LILLICO: Actually, I was given two and a half months of training in Hindi with which I had had no previous experience. The theory was that, since I had learned Japanese and Chinese, I must be able to understand Hindi also, which I did not.

Q: How long did you stay in India?

LILLICO'S USIA/INDIA EXPERIENCE: 1953-55

LILLICO: I was in India almost exactly two years. I went out just ahead of the McCarthy troubles and had a series of jobs around USIS New Delhi until late in '53 when some of the editors of the USIS magazine, the American Reporter, came home.

Then I took up the job as editor of the American Reporter. I kept that job until '55 when my wife had a medical emergency. We came on back to the states at that time.

Q: Now, Stu, tell us something about American Reporter, in New Delhi.

LILLICO: The American Reporter was originated during Chester Bowles time as the U.S. ambassador in India. It was an effort to put the American point of view in front of the people of India. Traditionally, they had been dependent on either British newspapers or, since their independence, on Indian-owned papers. They were extremely conservative, and poorly informed on the United States. So Chester Bowles who was very much a public relations man, started this magazine.

The first effort was in English. Then, over a period of a couple of years, up to eight different language editions were established. By the time I took over as editor, we had what was said to be the largest circulation of any publication in India — something like eight hundred thousand copies.

As we used to say, it was a daily paper issued twice a month. It was tabloid size with articles furnished by IPS and some of our own local writers. Quite a few special writers, American newspaper people, did articles on order. Others did articles on their own particular interest back in the States that we wanted to present to the Indian people.

We did the editing in English and then turned it over to translators to do into the other Indian languages. Part of the printing was done in Bombay; part in New Delhi and, in the latter days, some of it was done as I recall in Calcutta.

We had an American staff of two editors. Howard Needham was, in a sense, the production manager and I more or less was the managing editor. The PAO, of course, was our overall boss. We did work quite closely with the Embassy people, although after Chester Bowles left, the DCM and the succeeding Ambassador had less feeling of urgency on the American reporter so they gave us a minimum of direction.

Q: You edited this newspaper for how many years?

LILLICO: For just about two years, I think it is safe to say that Howard Needham and I were the first professional newsmen to run it. Previously, it had been run by primarily public relations and Madison Avenue types rather than professional newsmen. The character somewhat changed when Needham and I were doing it.

ETHIOPIA, 1955

Q: Now, from New Delhi, you next went to Ethiopia. What do you remember about your tour in Ethiopia?

LILLICO: I remember Ethiopia as being the most nerve-wracking place I have ever served. I do not know just why that was. I found working with the Ethiopian government and people to be a source of a great deal of tension. I was not unhappy when I was transferred. In the meantime, we were doing on a smaller scale what we had done in India. We put out a daily news bulletin, the material for which was taken off the wireless file. We also picked up headlines from the morning VOA news. We put out, as I recall, up to ten mimeograph pages, both sides, of news and commentary in English, plus a single sheet of translation into Amharic, the language of the ruling group at that time in Ethiopia.

We had a rule of thumb that the people we were trying to reach were able to speak and read English. Those who did not speak English probably had very little influence on Ethiopian policy for lack of education. [English was generally taught in primary schools.] Of course, the vast majority of Ethiopians could not read any language.

We followed that [policy] fairly steadily, despite occasional efforts to get us off into something else. That seemed to be our best bet, all the way through. We had a circulation, as I recall, around twelve hundred, mostly right in Addis Ababa itself, but we did send copies to other parts of the country by mail.

We worked with the three principal newspapers in Addis Ababa. One was in French, run by an expatriate American. The second [in English] was run by a Canadian and the third in Amharic. All were government organizations, but we had excellent relations with them, I am happy to say.

In addition, USIS had a good library and we did have a scholarship program. It was a good operation, I think, in Addis Ababa.

ZANZIBAR; 1960

Q: Now, Stuart, you served as public affairs officer in Zanzibar right after Ethiopia, didn't you?

LILLICO: That is right. There had been no American representation in Zanzibar until the summer of 1960. A Project Mercury tracking station had opened in Zanzibar that year.

Shortly afterwards, it was decided to open a consulate there. When the consulate decision was made, it was agreed that USIS should come, too, to help with the public relations work.

I was told we had the smallest budget for a USIS post anywhere in the world. Really my only claim to fame was that I had one of the best looking secretaries in USIS. The consulate itself had two American officers, the consul and vice-consul, and the USIS had me.

We were all in one building. Off and on, we had two American secretaries. There was a temptation to rotate them, but we were distinctly a single family there. There was no serious effort to exclude USIS from the running of the consulate, and the consulate people took a very direct personal interest in the running of USIS. Unlike some other places where I have served, we were all talking the same language.

We did not have a great big program, as you can imagine with the smallest budget, but we did send students both to the States and, more often, to American-oriented secondary schools around the world. We sent several to Beirut, including one to the American University of Beirut. Q: Now, what do you remember about serving in Zanzibar. After all, it was a pretty unique place.

LILLICO: Yes, it was strictly unique. I remember it as being a very pleasant place to work and to serve. The climate, of course, was excellent, very much like here in Hawaii.

The people are extremely friendly and our relations with, first, the British [colonial-style] government and later with the Arab-dominated Zanzibar government were good.

OUR RELATIONS

We had, I am happy to say, quite a bit of leisure time which we managed to fill with pleasant occupations, but mostly, it was a matter of maintaining personal relationships with the Zanzibar people. I think we were very successful in that.

Unfortunately, the people we were most successful in establishing relations with were Arab types. After the uprising in 1964, those people all were swept out of office. Many of them left the country so that we wound up with relatively less important contacts with the new government.

UPRISING IN ZANZIBAR

Q: Well, some of these uprisings in African countries can be pretty scary experiences. Did you have anything happen to you that we might be put in that classification?

LILLICO: The uprising in Zanzibar was completely unexpected. I had a phone call about 3 o'clock one morning from my secretary, who lived in Zanzibar town proper — I lived out on the edge of town — saying that shooting had started around the — I think she said police — station.

Since she had quite a few Arab contacts, my secretary thought it was serious. I then called the consul, Fritz Picard, and the vice consul, Don Petterson. After a few reports from other people, we began calling the American residents in Zanzibar, of which there were about fifty, to be prepared to rendezvous at a couple of safe havens that we had established previously.

One was my house which was in a compound near the airport. The other was a compound where two Americans lived on the other side of town. About 6 o'clock, people began

arriving at our place and, apparently, they were doing the same thing on the other side of town.

We sat around until 8 o'clock or so, when we could hear shooting in the distance. About then we realized that we were in for a serious uprising. So, we began making preparations to all get together in one place.

Most people came just as they were — some, really, actually in their pajamas, but with the bare necessities. We thought it better not to let them try to go home. About noon, things quieted down and all of our people filled up our cars and drove in convoy down to what at that time was called the English Club, in the center of Zanzibar.

We stayed there until the following afternoon when the U.S. Destroyer Manley came. It laid off the port for a while and then began ferrying us out to the ship. The decision to evacuate the Americans from Zanzibar was made primarily by the consul, Fritz Picard, on the basis of his judgment which, I guess, was sound.

In any event, we took all the Americans — mostly Project Mercury people, of course, — plus quite a few Americans and some English who were at the hotel, and ferried them across overnight to Dar es Salaam. The consul and vice consul both stayed behind. As the history shows, the consul was declared persona non grata by the new Zanzibar government a couple of weeks later. Petterson held the fort then until Frank Carlucci was sent out to replace Fritz Picard as consul. Carlucci stayed a couple of months, I believe.

The uprising was scary to the extent that a lot of people were running around with guns and at least half a dozen people that we knew were shot down in the streets, not too very far from where we were. But after that first blow-up, it quieted down.

Since most of our friends in the government were Arabs; we, of course, were concerned about their fate. Many of them simply disappeared. I never did hear what happened to them.

By and large, it was the end of our USIS operation in Zanzibar, although the library remained. I do not believe we ever had another USIS officer, but I am not positive about that.

NEXT POST: KITWEI IN RHODESIA

Q: I do not think so. Now, Stu, what was your next post after Zanzibar?

LILLICO: Kitwe, on the Copperbelt in what was then Northern Rhodesia; it is now Zambia. We were two or three weeks at Dar es Salaam. I remember my wife and I stayed with Gene Rosenfeld for a week or so until we found a hotel where we could stay.

My son who was about fourteen years old had been with us in Zanzibar on vacation from his school in Nairobi. We were able to send him back up to Nairobi, so he was not with us in Dar. After three or four weeks with USIS Dar es Salaam, the agency decided to open a one-man post in Kitwe. We went by ship down to Louren#o Marques in Mozambique and drove from there up way of Lusaka about 500 miles to the Copperbelt.

Kitwe was chosen as a center for the USIS mainly because it was the biggest of the small communities on the Copperbelt. It was the site of a very large open pit coppermine and had a substantial British presence as well as representatives of many other nations.

We were able to find a combined residence and office on Edinburgh Road (which probably has a different name now), in the center of town. I set up a USIS office there, mostly with a few books and publications and business cards. The rest of my job mainly was just shaking hands around town and trying to impress on people that the U.S. was not going to eat them alive or anything like that.

As for successes, if in any of my tours I did a good job, it would have been in Kitwe. It was just at the time of the split between China and the Soviet Union. The local African labor

leaders, who had been enchanted with Marxism really did not have anywhere to go. All of a sudden they discovered that America was there and we were interested in them.

TRANSFER TO JAPAN, 1964

I began getting quite a few inquiries and openings from places that we could work. At that moment, I was offered a transfer to Japan which I could not resist and so we left Kitwe - and Africa - in late September, 1964.

Q: Well, Stu, it seems to me your whole background had a great deal more to do with Asia than it did with Africa. But, be that as it may, you went from Northern Rhodesia to Japan. To what city did you go in Japan?

LILLICO: We went to Sendai, which is about two hundred miles north of Tokyo and is generally regarded as the center of the Tohoku area of Japan — a large chunk of the main island of Japan.

By a happy coincidence, this is the area in which my wife had been brought up. Her parents, American missionaries, had been stationed in Sendai at the time of her birth and they remained there for nearly ten years. Later, they were transferred to another city, also in Tohoku. Her family was well-known as educators and was still very affectionately remembered by many people in Sendai.

Q: You speak and read Japanese and I understand that during World War II you used that knowledge to good advantage?

LILLICO: Yes, both my wife and I worked for the old Army Map Service outside Washington, translating Japanese maps and producing new Romanized maps for the Armed Services. We were with a fairly large group of Nisei Japanese and some Issei doing this translation work. I greatly increased my knowledge of Japan's geography at that time, which was a big help when I went back in 1964.

The USIS in Sendai was a heritage, I guess you would say, of the post-war CI&E operation. It had established libraries and done a great deal of work that USIS came to do later. CI&E was in a large mausoleum of a building, a great big place almost like the state capitol, and had a program of films which was very popular and scholarships and lecturers. I inherited all of this from a series of excellent people — they are not PAOs, but were called center directors — that were there before me.

We remained five years in Sendai, the two-year balance of the tour that had been broken off from Africa and then a second three-year tour that ended in 1969. During that time, I traveled extensively!! around Northern Japan. We worked closely particularly with publishers and radio people. We had a series of seminars for newspaper men, correspondents, editors and publishers, bringing in American newsmen to work with them. We moved this seminar series around from one city to another each year. I think it was an excellent operation and it continued after my departure and after USIS Sendai closed down. Mrs. Lillico's family had been missionaries in Sendai: she had a good entree into Sendai circles. I feel very relaxed about the job in Sendai. For one thing, I felt at home there. Secondly, my wife's family was relatively well-known so that I had an entree.

Also, by that time, I was sufficiently senior, with a bald head, so that I had automatic standing in Japanese society. People were beginning to refer to me as an elder rather than as a youngster coming in. It was a very happy tour.

Q: Wasn't that area the seat of educational institutions?

LILLICO: Yes. Sendai has four big important universities. Two are government institutions, the Tohoku University which used to be an imperial university, and hence very prestigious, and a prefectural university of education which was slanted more towards teachers.

Then there were two prominent Christian schools. One had been run by my wife's father many years before. The second was a girls' school. All four were important and we worked closely with the faculty and the student groups there.

Among other things, it was always easy to start an English class. It is amazing how many ideas you can sell if you do it in a form of teaching English conversation.

Q: Well, you have been through the mill, I can see that and your name is probably as well-known now in Sendai as it was then. Do you ever revisit Japan?

LILLICO: Yes, we went back in 1985, which happened to be our 50th wedding anniversary year. We visited Sendai again and met many of our friends of former days. We met the USIS staff which is now scattered through a lot of other offices. We had an opportunity to talk to a number of people with whom I had been working closely in education, and just buttonholing and shaking hands during my time there.

It was an extremely happy visit. Unfortunately, the weather was poor which is par, I guess, for Sendai. Here in Hawaii, quite a few of our former contacts in Tohoku pass through on their way to mainland U.S. Very often, they stop over and we have an opportunity to entertain them.

I have not left Tohoku, Japan behind me by any means. It is still very much a part of my life.

Q: Now, Stuart, did you ever serve a tour in Washington with the agency?

WASHINGTON TOUR

LILLICO: Yes, I had four years in Washington after New Delhi. The first year, I was in the IPS newsroom in the old 1776 Building. After about a year, the news division of the State Department, as it was then — it has a different name now — Lincoln White was the

department's spokesman at the time — came across the fact that I had had twenty years of newspaper experience before I joined the agency.

Anyhow, they asked me to join the news division staff. So, I spent three years over there. Again, I had an interesting assignment, working with, in particular, the Japanese correspondents in Washington and with, strangely, the British correspondents.

I found them extremely pleasant and competent people and I was sorry eventually to break up that relationship, although other good assignments followed.

Q: Stu, have you enjoyed, at least felt a great deal of satisfaction, out of your years with the U.S. Information Agency?

LILLICO: Yes, I have actually. When I joined, USIS was part of the State Department, and when I first went out, I had a diplomatic passport. While I was in India, the USIS was separated from the department and became USIA. We went through a number of changes of emphasis and leadership and personnel in the following year.

EVALUATION OF USIA PERSONNEL AND WORK

I must say that almost all of the people with whom I worked were very competent. I can think of only one or two that were, you might say, blundering idiots. In general, I felt that the USIS work attracted good people and generally was effective.

I sometimes wished that our mission in each particular post had been more clearly defined. I had a feeling that the individual post, the individual country, suffered from too frequent changes of personnel. The PAO would be transferred, the new man would come in, and then two or three more senior, long time people would be transferred out. Soon we would have to invent the wheel all over again.

There would be almost no contact with the origins of the post except through a few of the locals who sometimes would have been happy to tell us how we ought to run it but, very often, were too smart to try.

If there were a change to be made in the philosophy of the agency and its overseas operation, I would say we need to have a clearer understanding of what each country and each post is trying to do and then have more continuity in the people who serve there.

Q: Well, I think we have run the gamut of your career with USIA. I know there are many, many, many things you could say, Stu, that you have not because of lack of time, but I want to thank you for participating with me in this oral history project for USIA.

We have luckily had a chance to do it in Honolulu where Stu Lillico is now retired.

End of interview